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## **A CRASH COURSE IN ACADEMIC WRITING FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: CHALLENGES, SOLUTIONS AND PROSPECTS**

Представители российского научного сообщества в современных условиях все чаще сталкиваются с необходимостью публиковать результаты своих изысканий в рецензируемых журналах с высоким импакт-фактором на иностранном (в подавляющем большинстве случаев английском) языке. Однако реалии таковы, что большинство исследователей испытывает значительные трудности в процессе подготовки материалов к печати. Возможным решением данной проблемы нам видится введение интенсивного курса академического письма для студентов вузов. В среднесрочной перспективе этот шаг может привести к повышению публикационной активности российских ученых как на иностранном, так и родном языке. Данная работа представляет собой результаты двухлетнего исследования, цель которого заключалась в выявлении сложностей внедрения курса и его потенциальных перспектив, а также решении возникающих в ходе экспериментального обучения проблем.

**Ключевые слова:** академическое письмо, интенсивный курс, деятельностный подход к письму, публикационная активность, автономия, умения письменной речи.

The reality of today is that scientists, graduate students and university faculty members in Russia are under constant pressure to publish their research in international peer-reviewed journals with a high impact factor. As writing in a foreign language often poses a challenge to authors, a possible solution to the problem may be the implementation of a crash course in academic writing within university curricula. This innovation could be considered potentially valuable for developing and supporting academic writing in both Russian and English in this country. What is more, such courses can be a convenient means for improving young scientists' publication rate in the medium term.

The study is based on the two-year research which investigated challenges in teaching academic writing to university students. A series of lessons was designed to solve the issues identified by the data which was obtained through a pretest. In order to evaluate the impact of the developed course, the pretest and posttest results were compared. The students' marks for final academic essays correlated with the posttest data.

**Key words:** Academic writing, crash course, process writing, publication rate, autonomy, writing skills.

## **Introduction**

The author's sixteen-year experience of teaching first-year majoring in English at Ural State Pedagogical University and Ural Federal University (Yekaterinburg) coupled with the opinions of colleagues from Yekaterinburg and across Russia shows that learners coming to the course have a vague idea of how to write in English as their writing (both micro and macro) skills are poor. Thus, they not only fail to put their thoughts into a meaningful whole, but also have no inkling of spelling rules, punctuation in English. Though writing was taught as part of both universities' curricula, the number of hours allocated to the discipline was (and still is) either not enough to develop and hone writing skills appropriate for undergraduate level or the time is not used effectively. Moreover, there is no continuity between school and university writing curricula. Even at teacher training colleges and universities undergraduates are often taught to write only dictations and dicto-comps (i.e. dictation + composition) in English. Such a focus on spelling and the mechanics of simple sentence writing is associated with the beginning or intermediate level [1, p. 9–12]. Lessons of university-level writing are often boring and discouraging as written tasks assigned to students are often identical at both educational levels: dictations and simpler essay types (descriptive, definition, narrative), which implies no development and hinders progress. Additionally, teachers are concerned with sentence-level issues and therefore neglect the essential components of academic writing. As a result, students (and later young scientists) lack the core academic competence necessary for getting published in peer-reviewed scientific journals. As V. Levchenko points out, "...a sufficient level of academic awareness becomes a prerequisite for a distinguished scholarly career" [2, p. 29]. Another peculiarity of today's reality is that English has become the international language of science. N. Popova and T. Beavitt observe that Russia is among those countries where the most rapid growth in publishing research in English is observed [3, p. 56]. Therefore, young scientists lacking sufficient experience of writing research papers in

their mother tongue have to do it in a foreign language. Nevertheless, the challenges mentioned above should not discourage educators from tackling them. Given that academic writing is not taught systematically in this country, a feasible solution can be a crash course in the discipline taught in higher education programs.

## **Methodology**

### ***General Background***

Academic writing courses (in both Russian and English) – at least at Yekaterinburg universities – are still rudimentary as teachers lack relevant expertise in the field, cf. [4, p. 5–8]. Another enormous problem caused by total teacher-centred instruction is undeveloped cognitive skills and rudimentary metacognitive knowledge. Russian students are known to be accustomed to teachers' guidance, and this dependence becomes a stumbling block on the way to self-directed learning. This is due to common practice in educational institutions in this country when teachers just set their students writing topics and the deadline for the papers (finished products) to be given in for grading. This product-based approach reveals "...a tendency to neglect the development of essential writing skills that students will need for the long term" [5, p. 31]. What is more, they create the so-called writer's block. Offering teacher-centred instruction and out-dated teaching methods and materials means that most undergraduates (later postgraduate students and scientists) lack not only macro, but also basic micro writing skills (e.g. mechanics). The author's former students cited academic writing as the major difficulty while they were doing their advanced degrees (MA, PhD) in the USA, the UK and Germany.

In order to foster students' autonomy and help them become better writers, a shift in perspective is necessary. One possible change in the educational paradigm can be process writing. It necessarily involves learners in creative work, implies resourcing, i.e. collecting relevant data, its manipulation and analysis, etc. Thus, the approach leads to refining complex thinking skills and in conjunction with learner-oriented tasks, activities for independent work in and out of the classroom develops and reinforces both writing and cognitive skills. All things considered, a possible solution to the problem is a crash course (as a large amount of material is studied in a relatively short time) in academic writing for first-year students.

### ***Research Sample***

The two stages of the experimental research were conducted at Ural Federal University in the first semesters of the 2015/16 and the 2016/17 academic years in the subject Writing. The first research sample (2015/16)

consisted of 20 female students; the second sample (2016/17) comprised 21 undergraduates (18 females and 3 males). The study was limited to language students of the first year, since the first year at university is assumed to be the transition stage between secondary school and higher education.

### ***Instrument and Procedures***

In 2015/16 a combination of product and process approaches to writing was employed. The first two months of the four-month course were dedicated to micro skills development; the students were also introduced to personal and creative writing. Product-centered writing instruction was provided at this stage. The topics were chosen by the teacher. The undergraduates faced the task of writing dictations, dicto-comps, informal and formal letters, stories. A rubric with three descriptors (language accuracy, diction, and content organisation) was created to assess the students' papers.

During the second part of the course the focus was shifted to the process approach to enhance both writing and cognitive skills. The objective of this stage of the research was to identify possible obstacles to implementing process approaches in the L2 writing classroom. As a result, the course was redesigned for the 2016/17 academic year to familiarise students with the essentials of academic writing within the four months prescribed by the curriculum.

In order to further improve the course, more data was collected in 2016/17 through an academic writing test and comprised students' answers to 20 multiple choice and open questions covering the main topics of academic writing. The students sat the test in a thirty-minute session at the beginning and the end of the four-month course. The questions were taken from [6]. In accordance with the pretest data obtained, the above mentioned series of lessons was redesigned to introduce the undergraduates to the core principles lying at the heart of process writing more efficiently. The course lasted for one semester, i.e. 17 weeks from September 2016 till December 2016 with a total of 34 hours (two hours per week) and focused on developing and strengthening the learners' writing skills. It encompassed a range of topics from potential plagiarism to proofreading.

The pretest and posttest results were compared and a correlation between the posttest results and the undergraduates' grades in the final five-paragraph essays was established. Additionally, a questionnaire including 11 questions regarding the work of Academic Writing Centers and academic writing was distributed to faculty members, researches, students, teachers in the Russian Federation. The two questions relevant for this study concerned the possible location of Academic Writing

Centers and stages of formal education at which academic writing should be introduced in the curriculum.

### **Research Results and Discussion**

The results of the 2015/16 study are presented in detail in [7, p. 46–50].

According to the educational goals set, the pretest administered in September 2016 at Ural Federal University revealed the main gaps in the students' knowledge of academic writing. The pretest average score in the group was 5.4 points (maximum score 20.00).

During these four months, the undergraduates' work was focused on writing an argumentative essay alongside studying academic vocabulary, formal grammatical structures, punctuation. The academic texts underwent multiple drafting and revision cycles within a framework of process writing. This gave the learners an opportunity to produce multiple drafts before producing the final paper. At the drafting stage it is feedback that learners need most of all. We suggest feedback be given in the form of peer-review between drafts. Students exchange their texts and read their peers' products in class (or at home). Checklists are helpful for the purpose of assessment. In this phase peer-review mostly focuses on the paragraph structure, not on the errors students make. Obviously, this is the main advantage of process writing as concentrating on mistakes doesn't improve grammatical accuracy, nor does it improve writing fluency. The comments received from their peers and the teacher served as guidelines for further structure and organization revision. Each section (Introduction, Body, Conclusion) was subject to two revisions accompanied by a review of the final draft. Instructor-student and peer-to-peer interaction was combined with intensive self-study. The OWL and UEfAP web resources [8; 9] provided student-centered materials addressing various issues of the writing process.

Creating a strong thesis statement, argumentation and referencing were the major stumbling blocks for the students. To resolve the issue, the undergraduates were to find and analyze three sources and write arguments from them to support the claims in their essays. Summarizing and paraphrasing posed another challenge. Consequently, all final drafts were submitted electronically and checked for deliberate and unintentional plagiarism. The average result in the group was 90 % original writing.

At the end of the crash course in December 2016 the undergraduates did the posttest. The mean score was 12.5 points (62.5 %). The main product was a five-paragraph argumentative essay with elements of writing from sources. The group's average grade for this task was 6 points (60 %) out of 10, which agrees well with the students' posttest results.

Additionally, a questionnaire consisting of 11 questions related to academic writing was completed by 538 respondents from all across Russia. The results of the research suggest that though a crash course in this discipline offers considerable benefits, more significant progress depends on stronger continuity between writing courses at all educational levels (secondary school, university, postgraduate curricula).

As we advocate process-oriented instruction, it is important to note that the teacher's role is different – he/she no longer is the one who just sets his/her students a writing topic and in a week or so receives the finished document for correction. Thus, the teacher's role is that of a facilitator. More responsibility is delegated to learners themselves (peer-review, work on a number of drafts), which is truly autonomous learning. In addition, giving good feedback to peers involves critical thinking which is an essentially important skill for academic writing [10, p. 98–108]. At later stages (for example when learners submit the final drafts of their essays for correction) rubrics (purpose and genre; argument, structure of the paper, etc.) can be used to assess them.

Due to the fact that process writing is not fixated on the form and allows students to develop, revise, polish papers several times, it provides an excellent opportunity for enhancing learner autonomy through developing writing skills, cognitive and metacognitive awareness. Working likewise on punctuation, thesis statements, outlines, argument structure, etc. students can become better writers.

### **Conclusion**

The research has shown that in the course of process-oriented instruction the learners filled some gaps in their knowledge of academic writing and got relevant hands-on experience. The expertise is bound to enhance their academic and research writing quality in both Russian and English in the future as such skills are transferable. Unfortunately, there will be no more advanced writing courses in the participants' curriculum.

Still, we would like to point out several limitations of this study. Firstly, the research sample included only language students majoring in English due to the characteristics of the author's workload. Drawing more undergraduates from other majors can be a potential research direction; unfortunately, academic writing is for the most part not included in their curriculum. Another limitation of our research is the research sample mixed-ability nature. Four participants could hardly speak in English. In this respect, a question arises whether it is feasible to instruct ESP students in English. Despite the above mentioned limitations which necessarily must be taken into consideration, our analysis of the obtained

data reveals that the developed crash course contributed to writing competence improvement.

The necessity to introduce academic writing at all stages of formal education is evidenced by another research project currently in progress. The questionnaire results show that the majority of the respondents (228) stated that academic writing should be taught at all stages (in high school, bachelor's, master's, postgraduate programs). 375 (70 %) out of the 538 surveyed participants chose universities as the best location for Academic Writing Centers in Russia.

In conclusion, it is necessary to say that more significant progress in the field of academic (and what is more, research) writing in this country can only be made if there is strong continuity between writing courses at all educational levels.

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